

Methodist-shaped, Mandela praised roles of religion

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Nelson Mandela, the widely mourned South African leader lauded by religious figures as a colossus of unimpeachable moral character and integrity, had a deep connection with faith institutions.

Mandela, who died at age 95, was educated first at Clarkebury and then at Healdtown, Methodist boarding schools that provided a Christian liberal arts education.

“Both were important influences on his life,” said Presiding Bishop Zipho Siwa of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. “Indeed, after his time at Clarkebury, the young Mandela said his horizons had been broadened.”

At the December 10 memorial service at the Soweto stadium where Mandela spoke to 80,000 after his 1990 release from prison, Bishop Ivan Abrahams, the top executive of the World Methodist Council, based in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, delivered the sermon.

“We have been endowed with the rare privilege to take his legacy further,” said Abrahams, who grew up under South Africa’s apartheid system. “His mantle has fallen into our hands.”

Abrahams’s sermon followed remarks by President Obama. Also attending were former U.S. presidents George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton and various heads of states.

After the news of Mandela’s death on December 5, retired Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu said Mandela was mourned by South Africans, other Africans and the international community as a man admired widely in interreligious circles. “He preached a gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation,” Tutu wrote in a tribute on AllAfrica.com.

Mandela acknowledged his connections to religious institutions and faith groups at various meetings across the world.

“It was religious institutions—whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Jewish in the context of our country—they are the people who bought land, who built schools, who equipped them, who employed teachers, and paid them,” Mandela told the Parliament of the World’s Religions, which met in Cape Town in 1999. “Without the church, without religious institutions, I would never have been here today.”

Mandela told that gathering it was religious institutions that gave his fellow prisoners and him hope during the apartheid era that one day they would prevail. “Religion was one of the motivating factors in everything we did,” he said.

Soon after his release from prison, Mandela visited the World Council of Churches headquarters in Geneva. Olav Fykse Tveit, the World Council of Churches general secretary, described the leader’s relationship with the council as a special one.

“This is when he expressed his gratitude for the churches’ support to the antiapartheid struggle,” Tveit said, calling Mandela “a liberator who by force of his remarkable personality raised the dignity of Africans after centuries of colonialism, oppression and discrimination.” —RNS/added sources